

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH

A talk given by Ajahn Jagaro -- October 1988

It's very nice to sit meditation for a short time, at the end of the day. We take time to collect ourselves, to recollect our existence, to become aware of our experience of life, in order to understand this life and ourselves. So much of life is mechanical, and habitual, that we can spend a whole lifetime going round in circles, recreating situations, repeating old habits over and over again, never taking time to really consider what we are doing. What is it that we want out of life? Are we going in the right direction? Are we living in a way that will bring about that which we desire and aspire for? What is it all about anyway?

When we practise meditation we stop, don't we? We stop doing the mechanical, the habitual, stop running around physically, and we stop verbally. We're not taking in a lot of information. We're not preoccupying the mind with a lot of sensory stimulation, sensory proliferation or distractions, and what happens? Things begin to settle down, the dust begins to settle. When the dust begins to settle, all the unsettled business, all the unresolved emotions, and all conflicts are clearer in our consciousness.

We begin to notice what we've been doing, how we feel – about ourselves, about others, about life. We notice ourselves. It is so very important to begin to notice oneself, what one is doing, because each one of us creates life. We have a very important contribution to make. The way we approach life, our volitional actions of body, speech and mind help to shape this world and life for ourselves and others.

That's not to say, "I control everything". That's ridiculous. Of course I don't. But it's also not true to say that "I'm a helpless victim, I have no control or contribution at all". That would be completely fatalistic. I have a very obvious contribution to make to life. The quality of my mind, the volition behind my actions, the way I live is my contribution to life and helps shape the quality of life for myself and others. It's very important to take time off, to notice what we are doing, and what we want. This is the way to cultivate Right View.

It has been said over and over again that Buddhism is a path of wisdom, not blind faith, not superstition, and not doctrine. Wisdom is not knowledge, nor is it intellect. It is an appreciation of the way things are. An appreciation of the laws of nature, how they work, our relationship with nature and where we fit into the laws of nature. This wisdom comes from reflecting, observing, listening and watching, not just from reading books.

Sometimes people with very little knowledge, very little intellectual sophistication, may have great wisdom. Why is that? In their simplicity and less cluttered state of mind, they are a little more attuned to the experience of life and the ways of nature. In order to become attuned to nature, we need to realize we're part of this nature. Nature is not just trees, grass, sky and air. That's part of it. But everything that is in existence is part of nature. There is nothing unnatural to be found anywhere. Everything that happens is natural. We are part of it; we need to understand it.

We hear that Buddhism is the way of wisdom, and quite often we hear that it is the Middle Way. That can be misunderstood. One can begin to think of Buddhism as wishy-washy, sit on the fence, everything is all right, and that Buddhism has no particular view about anything. You can do more or less, what you want. That's not true at all. The path that the Buddha laid down, the Middle Way is actually very, very explicit and very clear. Probably the most explicit, the most comprehensive and the clearest of all spiritual paths in existence today.

When the Buddha taught the first sermon to the five ascetics, just a few months after his enlightenment, he said, "I have found the Middle Way. This way which avoids extremes of sensual indulgence and the mortification of the flesh. This middle way is the path to insight, to knowledge, to peace, to enlightenment, to

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Nibb*na". What is the path? He then enumerated the Eightfold Path. The Buddha himself is quoted as having said, "Amongst all the conventional teachings I give, amongst all the conditioned Dhammas, the highest of all is the Eightfold Path". That's pretty high praise from the Buddha himself. It is the heart, the essence of Buddhism, and it is present in every aspect of Buddhism. If one can grasp clearly the meaning of the Eightfold Path, one will have a pretty good idea of what Buddhism is all about and what one needs to do in order to be a Buddhist.

Right View

The first step of the Eightfold Path is Right View. The first spark of Right View arises, when we start to consider our existence, "What am I? What am I doing? It's not necessarily coming from study, reading about this and that. It may come from our experience of meditation. When we start to look at our lives, we become aware of the very basis of Buddhism: we begin to notice that we are responsible for our lives. The way we live brings about results, and it affects ourselves and others, and sometimes the results really aren't good. This first spark of right view is the realization that I am responsible. Not blaming or laying the burden on someone else or on some deity. This is the first appreciation of the Law of Karma. The way I live, the state of my mind, all my actions bring about results.

Then I begin to notice that I suffer, my mind is unhappy. It's burdened. There is fear, jealousy, hate and anger. This is not due to the environment or other people. It is my own creation. That's another spark of right view. I begin to appreciate the first two of the Noble Truths. There is suffering, mental unease and anguish. Even in the midst of comfort and prosperity, I am still miserable. I notice that this mental anguish is not due to anyone or anything else, but is due to this mind.

Right View in Buddhism is the first step of the Eightfold Path. This is why we say it's a path of wisdom, not just a doctrine or belief. It's a noticing and observing of ourselves and our lives. The Buddha taught what is obvious, what is there to be seen. Although it's there to be seen it doesn't mean we see it, it may be obvious but it doesn't mean we understand it or notice it. Maybe we miss it all the time because it is so obvious. The Buddha pointed things out which we need to consider. He taught nothing outside of what can be seen and realized within this body, with this mind. The whole path is to be developed through this body and mind. We have all that we need. All we have to do is to start noticing what is around us. That's when the spark of Right View begins to arise.

One very nice story is of a man I know here in Perth. He was brought up as a Buddhist actually, and considered himself one, but he never really took an interest or practised anything beyond just the superficial. On one occasion, he decided to go on a trip, with his wife, around Australia, camping and driving. While they were travelling from Perth to Adelaide, they camped out in the desert. One night, camping out in the middle of nowhere, just open space, he couldn't sleep so he got up and went out of the tent and just walked in the stillness of the night, in the emptiness of the desert. And he found himself completely alone. In this emptiness, he noticed himself, this human being, and he became very aware of the emptiness in his life. He asked himself, "What am I doing? What's it all about anyway? All this study and accumulation of degrees and knowledge and money, so what? What do I want out of life?" There was a spark of right view there. A stopping and considering. The mechanical, the habitual existence came to a stop for a moment. All thought comes to a stop for a moment and this reflective thought arises: consideration and appreciation of one's present existence.

Right Thought or Aspirations

The result of Right View is that Right Aspiration or Right Thought arises. This happens to us in various ways. I'm sure it has happened to everyone here, especially when we have some traumatic experience, or something

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helps us to stop and think and observe. Buddhism is not common in Australia and meditation is unusual. So why do you come here? Something has arisen in your mind that makes you stop and consider. What am I doing here? What do I want out of life? How can I improve this life? This is a spark of Right View, a spark of understanding involving Kamma. I am responsible.

This bit of Right View causes Right Aspiration: the intention to cultivate something. We know that selfishness – selfish, egotistic indulgence doesn't make us happy or peaceful. It doesn't seem to ever end. Hate, anger, negativity – it's the fire that burns, and you don't have to have it to suffer from it. Someone close to you has it and you also suffer. This we have all seen. We wish to free the mind from selfishness and the obsessive uncontrolled desire for sensual experience, all the negative forces within us, the anger and aversion which lead to malevolence and hurtfulness in our relationships with other human beings and even in our relationship with ourselves. How often do we feel aversion towards ourselves? Right View brings about Right Aspiration to do something about this: to try and change the mind, bring about more peace and more happiness, by trying to change the attitudes, the intentions and aspirations – towards giving, sharing, kindness and compassion. This begins to arise in the mind, doesn't it? If it hadn't arisen, you wouldn't be here, because we don't teach anything other than this.

So these are the first two steps on the Buddhist Path: Right View and Right Aspiration. They are related, they are to do with wisdom and understanding, not just believing. Now that's fine. We have a spark of understanding and a spark of intending to live our lives in a new way. But that's not enough, is it? It has to be followed through. So there is the rest of the path. This Eightfold Path is a comprehensive training, because from our understanding and intention, there has to be a carrying through to the way we actually live our lives.

The Buddha laid down the rest of the path as a way to train ourselves, to train this body, speech and mind in order to realize peace and happiness. Buddhism is not just a sort of philosophy. It has to do with us, with our lives, how we live, and the responsibility is with the individual, because we have these bodies, the ability to speak, to think; and we can do things. So the path of the Buddha requires practical application, actually doing the work. Personally, I like that approach rather than saying "You're all enlightened anyway". It doesn't help very much if I tell you, you are a Buddha, and you're enlightened. You can say, "Thank you very much", but you still feel the same, still have the same habits, still create the same problems. It is necessary to know what to do with one's present position: being a human being, with a body and mind. How should one deal with this? This is where the Buddha was so brilliant, so compassionate, pointing out the path, something that we can use to train ourselves, and to develop ourselves. Not as commandments or blind ritual but as skilful means. According to our spark of right view, we have a way of following it through.

Right Speech

The third factor on the Eightfold Path is Right Speech. This is anything but wishy-washy. I do a lot of talking, I think many of us do a lot of talking. The tongue is a very powerful thing. They say that the pen is mightier than the sword. I think the tongue is mightier than the pen. It is so much quicker, isn't it? To write can be a tedious thing, even if you want to write a nasty letter, of course it can be easier to write a nasty letter than a nice letter. You can really pump up some adrenalin and energy if you're getting stuck into someone. But it still takes a lot of time to write it down, and in that time there's time for consideration and maybe a change of mind. However the tongue is so quick, so immediate. Before you even think twice, you have already spoken. The Buddha said that this speech of ours is an action. It brings about results. What we say shapes life, can cause wars, or can cause peace. There are different types of wars. We read about all the wars overseas, the international wars, but there are also the interpersonal wars. We have a lot of those, don't we? How many wars have you created in the last week? When we're aspiring to peace and clarity of mind, it's very important to master one's speech. The Buddha said develop Right Speech, avoid Wrong Speech. This is not just nebulous idea. He was very explicit. He said that wrong speech is lying and avoiding truth. That causes a lack of trust

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and it's anything but peaceful. It is very difficult to be peaceful when you're living with people who don't tell the truth because you can't trust them. Everything is lost when one's honesty is gone. I like to reflect on the monkhood, which is based on very high standards of morality, impeccability. It all rests on one thing: honesty. All the rules of the monk depend on the monk acknowledging that that is true, and acknowledging it if one voluntarily breaks a rule. It's not a police state we don't have cameras! We haven't yet installed cameras in the monks' huts to see what they are doing. That would not be in keeping with the spirit of Buddhism. I don't know what they are up to; it's not necessary to know, because it's an honour system. It all depends on this one rule: truthfulness. I shall not lie. If the person is no longer committed to truthfulness, how do you know that anything else is going to hold? It's impossible to trust, to be at peace and have spiritual growth without honesty.

This one rule is so important, and it happens to be a rule of training for every Buddhist – monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. It's essential for everyone who's interested in peace. I undertake the training to refrain from lying. It's the fourth precept for Buddhist lay people. Wrong speech is not the way to peace either. To go about telling tales with malicious intent, trying to stir up fights and conflicts and break up friendships are all examples of Wrong Speech. Another aspect of Wrong Speech is abusive and harsh speech. There's a fair bit of that in our society. Putting someone down, really getting stuck into someone. It's hurtful. The last type is useless speech, just repeating bits of information and gossip that tends to confuse and distract people. This isn't training the mind. In order to cultivate Right Speech, we avoid these four types of speech, and we develop truthful speech, that is kind, gentle and pleasant to the ear, words which bring harmony and friendship between people, words of wisdom which are useful, beneficial for our well-being and spiritual growth. So the Middle Way is pretty clear about how one should train one's speech. It's the same regardless of who is speaking, regardless of time and place. Wherever you go, this is the foundation of peaceful co-existence within a community. That's the third factor of the Eightfold Path. Consciously remember that. It is something we train ourselves with. It is not a command "Thou shalt not lie; if you do, you'll go to Hell". It's not saying that at all. It's saying, "This action of speech is an action which has its consequences". How we speak contributes to the quality of our lives and the quality of other people's lives. So let us consider wisely, let us take responsibility. If we want peace and happiness, use speech for that purpose. Train yourself; you have the ability.

Right Action

The fourth factor of the Eightfold Path is Right Action. Again it's not that, "Thou shalt not". We have a physical body, so we have the ability to do things with this body, and what we can do is very wide ranging. We can use this body for harmful, violent, selfish, destructive purposes, can't we? We can use this body in order to create Hell, in order to make trouble, to be a nuisance to others. Or we can use the body to be of service, to help, to create well-being for ourselves and others. This body is an instrument, in itself it is neutral. It depends on who's using it and for what purpose. People say that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. The flesh is not weak; it's not strong; it's just flesh. Flesh is actually neutral. It's the mind that drives it. It is the mind that puts volition into it, causing it to act. It's not the body that decides to go and rob a bank, it's the mind that thinks that, isn't it? It's not the body that says, "I think I'll have another glass of whisky", or "My body tells me to have another beer". There's an element of truth to that, because the body does have its signals. The body affects the mind as well, but the volitional action comes from the mind, not the body. So this body is an instrument for us to use as we wish. How do we use it? We can be a real nuisance, use it for all sorts of harmful things, or we can use it for wonderful things, for service, being kind, gentle and helpful.

So the Buddha said train this body, use it for skilful things. Avoid killing any living creature because every living creature wants to live. And every living creature thinks that its life is the most important life in this whole universe. We can refrain from killing living creatures because we can train the body. We don't use this body to steal that which is not ours. We respect the property of others because we respect their feelings. It is

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also important to understand our sexual nature and to train our selves to live within the restraint befitting our status in life. The instinctive sexual forces have no knowledge of right or wrong, good or bad; and when followed indiscriminately they can result in much conflict and suffering. So for inner peace and outer harmony we train ourselves to refrain from adultery and other forms of sexual misconduct. We become responsible human beings, true to our vows and commitments, rather than just following the basic instincts.

Now in order to have this control over our body and speech it's essential that we be in control of our mental faculties. Thus it is obvious that alcohol and other drugs which cause heedlessness will impede our ability to train ourselves. So we choose to avoid such things not because of any commandment but because we wish to have the freedom of choice that is only possible when the mind is clear and alert. This is the cultivation of Right Action in the Eightfold Path.

Right Livelihood

Based on Right Speech and Right Action the next factor of the path is Right Livelihood. We all have to earn a living but how do we go about it? Would it be right to try to secure our own happiness at the expense of someone else's happiness? So we train ourselves to earn our living by honest means without exploiting or hurting others physically, mentally, or spiritually. I'm willing to train myself, and this is how morality and ethical standards come about. They are not commandments laid down by someone, demanding that you obey. This is coming from your own wisdom through close reflection and consideration. You can train yourself. What is the training? What you do, what you say depends on volition. What is volition? It comes from the mind. The mind is the forerunner; the mind is that which wills, motivates and drives us. It is behind the speech and behind the action; this is the volition: the mind.

This mind needs to be trained. The mind is the area for investigation and training, and this involves meditation. This is the remaining part of the Eightfold Path. So, Right View leads to Right Aspiration. Having Right Aspiration, then we know how to train our speech, our physical actions, and to consider and train our livelihood. But, all of that is dependent on our mind. So, the last three steps on the path have to do with cultivating the mind: Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

Right Effort

Some people believe that Buddhism is the way of no effort. They've heard the teaching that making an effort cannot enlighten you. So what do you do, make no effort? Will you still get enlightened? In that case, more people should be enlightened than unenlightened, because there are more people making no effort than people who make effort. In that case, the cattle grazing in the fields and the flies flying around should be more enlightened, because they don't make any effort at all; they just follow their instincts. Yes, it's true, you cannot become enlightened if you make an effort that's obsessive or gain-oriented. That kind of effort is, in itself, an obstacle. But it is truer to say that you cannot become enlightened if you make no effort at all. That is very true.

The Buddha said there is Right Effort, balanced effort; it's not result-oriented effort, using just willpower and force. It is the mind balanced with Right View and Right Aspiration, putting forth an effort to train. How can we train our speech and our bodies? Only through effort, there needs to be effort or nothing is achieved. The effort must be made to abandon that which is harmful and to develop that which is skilful. However, that is still not enough, is it? It requires clarity of mind to know that which is harmful and that, which is skilful. It requires a clarity of mind to know what we are saying, what we are doing. It requires mindfulness, doesn't it? This is crucial. It is the ability to know what we are doing. This is the actual trainer. Who is the trainer? It is the mind? What aspect of the mind is the trainer? It is awareness.

Right Mindfulness

"Buddha" means "Awakened One". The one who knows. There's the knowing, alertness, and presence of mind: that which knows what I am saying, that knows the intention, that knows the actions of speech, body and thought. The Buddha is the incomparable trainer of those who wish to be trained. The Buddha, the Knower, Awareness, Mindfulness. That is the quality that enables one to train. Take that away and there is no training. There is only habitual, mechanical, instinctive behaviour. This mindfulness is to be cultivated and strengthened. It's part of the path. We take responsibility for cultivating this quality of being awake. How can we be awake? By the practice of remembrance, of not forgetting the present moment, not forgetting to know what we are doing, what we are saying, what we are thinking. And so, we come to this crucial part of the training in Buddhism; the path of cultivating mindfulness. This is where meditation is so important. But meditation is not an isolated thing that we only do when we sit cross-legged. It is something in our daily lives as well, meditation in action, cultivating awareness in our ordinary existence, our ordinary activities, because what we say has its effect, what we do has its effect, what we think has its effect. So cultivating mindfulness in our daily lives, cultivating the quality of awareness, is essential. It's a training, something to be developed by those aspiring to peace.

Right Concentration

When we have this Right Effort and we're cultivating Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration arises. Concentration here means the ability to focus your attention, to direct your mind, to observe closely. To focus your attention on the present experience, and penetrate deeply into the contents of our consciousness, the nature of this body, the nature of feelings, emotions and thoughts, the nature of mind itself. It's having that stability of mind that can focus and look with sustained attention. It's that which enables us to go a little bit deeper than just the superficial, just what is common knowledge, what is taken for granted. It's our ability to dwell, to look deeply. It's as if you're in a dark room, and you light a match, but it goes out quickly and you don't have that much of a look. But if you can light a candle, or better yet, an electric light, you can look closely and see everything in there. That's the power of concentration. It enables you to look closely so you can penetrate more deeply. What are doubt, desire, fear and anger? What is the body? What is this knowing itself, the mind, consciousness? Who am I?

If we strengthen the concentration through training, what happens? We have this tool, the mind is fit for work. We can penetrate and we can look closely. What happens when we look closely, when we begin to stop and consider our feelings and ourselves? We're back to the beginning again. When we stop and when we've got a mind that is that much more peaceful, that much more precise, we begin to have a deeper understanding, a deeper appreciation of the way things are, of the truth of existence, of the Four Noble Truths. So, we're back to Right View. Our view, our perception, our understanding of life becomes that much more correct, more enlightened, if you wish. As our view becomes more enlightened, our aspiration becomes purer. And as our aspiration becomes purer, our speech and action, the way we live, everything will become more refined, more caring, and more peaceful. And when we live accordingly, the mind itself responds by becoming more peaceful and clearer. Meditation becomes more refined, concentration becomes stronger, and we see more deeply. You can see what's happening here. You can see the path unfolding. It is all interrelated, interdependent. Strengthening one aspect helps to strengthen all of the other factors on the path.

Conclusion

So we have this wonderful tool, The Eightfold Path. The Buddha said it was the most important, the most skilful of all that was taught. The essence of the Buddhist teaching. This is what one who is interested in Buddhism needs to study. Try to make it really conscious in your mind, develop a conscious understanding of The Eightfold Path. If you understand just this much of Buddhism, you have all that you really need to work

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with, to realize happiness and peace, in order to cultivate the potential of your human existence. There's enough here, even without all the complicated philosophy, and psychology of all the different sects of Buddhism, all the esoteric and exoteric, all the ritual and ceremony. These eight factors of the Eightfold Path, if understood, if practised, developed and perfected, are sufficient for you to completely know Buddhism and benefit completely from the teachings of the Buddha. So try to remember these eight things, this very basic teaching in Buddhism. This is the Buddhist catechism. Christians have the Ten Commandments. We have the Noble Eightfold Path. The path of training for liberation, peace and happiness. There's Right View, Right Aspiration, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. And the Buddha said, "In any teaching, where the Eightfold Path is taught, there you will find enlightened beings". Pretty high recommendations!